PETER MESSENT

THE CRIME FICTION HANDBOOK

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Peter Messent

The Crime Fiction Handbook

Peter Messent

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2013

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Wiley-Blackwell is an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, formed by the merger of Wiley's global Scientific, Technical and Medical business with Blackwell Publishing.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Messent, Peter B.

The crime fiction handbook / Peter Messent.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-470-65703-4 (cloth) – ISBN 978-0-470-65704-1 (pbk.)

1. Detective and mystery stories – History and criticism. 2. Detective and mystery stories, English– History and criticism. 3. Detective and mystery stories, American–History and criticism. 4. Detectiv and mystery stories, Swedish–History and criticism. I. Title.

PN3448.D4M435 2011

809.3′872–dc23

2012008956

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image © UpperCut Images / Getty

Cover design by www.simonlevyassociates.co.uk

Part opener image © optimarc / Shutterstock

Acknowledgments

Thanks, first of all, to David Schmid and Chris Routledge, both of whom took time out of their bus schedules to read major sections of this work. Their comments make this a much better book than would otherwise have been, and their encouragement was much appreciated. Thanks too to others wh read individual sequences in the book: Charlotte Fallenius (who kept a close eye on m generalizations about Swedish culture), John Harvey, and Andy Pepper. Again, their critical input wa greatly appreciated. Any mistakes or stupidities left are mine alone. Dave Murray, as so often in pa cases, said things about the subject as we casually talked that opened my eyes to new angles on it an new ways of thinking about it. Thanks, too, to the students who have taken my crime fiction module the American and Canadian Studies Department at my home university (Nottingham) over the la decade. It is that teaching, and the ideas that came from those classes and in essay work, that hav enabled me to get a much better grasp on these materials than I would otherwise have. Thanks to m son and daughter, William and Alice, and step-daughters, Ella and Leah, for their interest and suppor And thanks as always, and love, to my wife, Carin, for her encouragement – even though I have nev quite been able to persuade her that crime fiction is a good thing.

Some of the material in this book is based on earlier work. My section on "The Police Novel," particular, is a re-working of the essay with that same name in Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley's *Companion to Crime Fiction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). I have also drawn on my other previou publications in the field, but – in all cases – considerably updated and revised them. These include th introduction to my own edited book, *Criminal Proceedings* (Pluto, 1997); two essays on Patric Cornwell, one in Warren Chernaik et al. (eds.), *The Art of Detective Fiction* (Macmillan, 2000) and th other in *Clues: A Journal of Detection* (Winter 2000); an essay on Thomas Harris that first appeared Philip Sutton (ed.), *Betwixt-and-Between: Essays in Liminal Geography* (The Gateway Press, 200 but that has been published several times since in updated forms; and two pieces on Cornwell an Harris in Michael D. Sharp's edited collection, *Popular Contemporary Writers* (Marshall Cavendis 2006).

I could not have asked for a better copy-editor than Hazel Harris as we worked to prepare the boo for publication. I recognize all the hard work she put into this task, and appreciate it greatly. Agai my thanks.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Phil Melling, who died of cancer just as I was completing He was a very good friend from our university days onward, a fine academic (and much more), and man of many passions. I will miss him greatly.

Introductory Note

In this book, I refer to crime fiction across the U. S. and European spectrum. But I recognize m
limitations. This is not a handbook of global crime fiction and, even within Europe and the America
I leave many traditions (Canadian, French, Italian, South American, Spanish, and others) unexamine
My own teaching experience is mainly in the field of U. S. crime fiction, and I rely on this area for
good many of my examples. I am relatively happy to do so because of both the importance and th
popularity of that writing. I write in the belief that what I say here will be useful to those interested
authors and countries that either I do not mention or to whom/which I give short shrift. The critic
approaches I take will, I hope, transfer across – to some degree at least – to that other material, thoug
I recognize the importance of cultural and historical context; the impossibility, too, of giving blank
rules for the reading of all instances of the genre. My chronological reach in this study is also limite
I am well aware of a fuller history than that I give, which can be traced in the work of such critics
Stephen Knight and Charles J. Rzepka. But I focus here on the best-known examples of the genr
particularly in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century context but with some attention to its nineteent
century pre-history. My decision to start with Edgar Allan Poe and Sherlock Holmes follows th
logic. I thought long and hard about the fourteen texts on which I focus in Part 3 of this book but ful
recognize the arbitrary nature of my choices. There are many other texts that cried out for the san
kind of attention. Those I have chosen, however, do allow me to refer back to the earlier parts of th
book, exemplifying a good number of the different approaches I lay out there. Crime fiction is one
those areas that either fosters compulsive readers or deters those who find the genre shallow and
little or no interest. While I recognize that is it the former who will have the most interest in th
book, I am hoping that some of the latter may read it too, and even alter their opinion of the genre as
result. Its enormous present-day popularity is a measure of its cultural importance and influence.

Part 1

Introduction

...[W]ith an expression of interest, [Sherlock Holmes] laid down his cigarette, and, carrying th cane to the window, he looked over it again with a convex lens.

“Interesting, though elementary,” said he as he returned to his favourite corner of the sette “There are certainly one or two indications upon the stick. It gives us the basis for sever deductions.”

Doyle (2003:

This short passage from Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) immediately inspir sparks of recognition for many readers. We assume almost without question that Holmes is talkin here to his slightly obtuse companion and chronicler, Dr. Watson. And we automatically recall th phrase “Elementary, my dear Watson” – in fact absent from the original written texts but present i their film versions – that traditionally accompanies Holmes' detections and explanations and h passed as a commonplace saying into the (English) language. We recognize Holmes' “deductions too, as the sign of his genius: the logical and analytic skills that enable him to coolly link cause effect; that “marvellous faculty” (Doyle 2001: 12) that enables him, for instance, to trace the histo of a watch and give detailed characteristics of its former owner, even despite its recent cleaning, in th opening chapter (“The Science of Deduction”) of *The Sign of Four* (1890). The “convex lens” is, course, part of what has become in consequent representations a magnifying glass, one of Holme most valued tools and the very icon of detective fiction – as instantly recognizable in his case as th deerstalker hat that has come to be synonymous with his professional attire and role. The cigarett too, hints at a certain leisure-class loucheness, or bohemianism as Watson calls it, confirme elsewhere by Holmes' use of morphine and cocaine – drugs he praises as “transcendently stimulati and clarifying to the mind” (Doyle 2001: 6).

Detective fiction has a long history and, in its modern form, is usually traced to a handful of stori by Edgar Allan Poe: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (184 1843), and “The Purloined Letter” (1845). All three feature Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, the Frenc detective whose deductive intelligence provides the model for Conan Doyle's protagonist. But it Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes that first gave detective fiction its enormous popular curren and began to make it such a resonant part of our cultural consciousness. Following, in one way another, in his footsteps are writers such as Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandle Georges Simenon, Patricia Highsmith, Henning Mankell, and Stieg Larsson (to name a significa few) – with Larsson being the first writer to sell over a million copies of his books in Amazon Kindle electronic bookstore. This type of sales figure, and the popularity (and often quality) of th various film and television spin-offs that have followed on the heels of the publication of suc authors' books, signifies the massive cultural appetite for, and importance of, crime fiction (the larg generic category to which detective fiction belongs) in the Western world from the late nineteent century to the present.

The question immediately raised is why crime fiction should have had such a massive impact and b so popular? And why, for instance, should we "enjoy" such best-selling novels as Thomas Harris' *Th Silence of the Lambs* (1988), with its scenes that include Hannibal Lecter's savage removal of policeman's face (he uses it to mask his own as he escapes imprisonment) and references to h cannibalism and shocking violence – his biting off (or so the implication is), for instance, of th tongue of a nurse who gets too close to him? In the punning relationship between Lecter's name an the French word for "reader" (*lecteur*), as well as in Lecter's own distinctive mix of refined sensitivi and predatory blood-letting, Harris may be suggesting that the line that divides the apparent "civilized" audience that consumes his books from its (normally firmly repressed) primal and savag instincts and tastes is thinner and more permeable than we think.

But there are other explanations available, too, for such readerly interest in crime and its ofte bloody and violently macabre manifestations – some of which complement the one just given, othe quite different. Critic David Stewart (1997) writes about non-fiction crime writing in a much earli period, examining the reportage of urban crime in mid-nineteenth-century America. But his focus o urban life and a rapidly expanding capitalist economy offers a helpful prompt for thinking about crim fiction too, and the nature of its appeal, both in the nineteenth century and later. Stewart sees th "relish" (681) with which the crime literature of that period was consumed in terms of an ambivalen about criminality and its relation to the dominant social order. The popular appeal of such writing, h suggest, lies in the way it "eroticized urban experience" (684) – that is, provided a necessary an thrilling release from the disciplinary procedures of capitalism, the "laws and behavioral practice (689) sustaining an increasingly regimented social order. The "exhilaration" (688) associated wi criminal danger and the darker underbelly of life in the city consequently stood as a direct an exciting contrast to a daily experience "that was, for the vast majority of city-dwellers, constrainin confining, and mind-numbingly dull" (684).

But Stewart also argues that crime writing engaged quite opposite emotions too, feeding on popular *fear* of crime and the threat to the reader's own security contained in such "narratives violation" (682). Thus, to modify one of his remarks, "[g]ore defacing [urban and textual] space [i still gore, and potentially the reader's own." Fears of "real urban danger" (697), then, inhabit the texts alongside the other emotions they trigger: the reader's desire for transgressive exciteme balanced by her or his need for security and safety. In identifying such ambivalences, Stewart offer perhaps, a larger lesson: that the appeal of (usually) violent crime – in both non-fiction and fiction has a multitude of (sometimes common but often contradictory) causes. In the second part of th book, in which I offer a brief overview of the politics of crime fiction and of some of its main form and key concerns, I extend this argument to indicate the wide range of reasons for the popularity this type of fiction, and the complexity of their mix.

I return, though, to the violent and bloody episodes in Harris' novel and the pre-history to the implied in Stewart's essay. For Stewart also identifies in his ante-bellum subject matter anoth crucial, and related, tension – the way in which the qualities of rational control and logical explanatio that crime reportage then, and (as I draw my own analogies) crime fiction now, associates with lav bringers – be they detectives or police – are undermined and contrasted with the descriptions of th spilling of blood, of sexual abuse, and of physical suffering that excessively inhabit many examples such writing. He identifies a curious connective logic to this relationship as he looks at one particul newspaper story, "Horrible and Mysterious Murder in Broadway," published in *Frank Leslie Illustrated Newspaper* on August 2, 1856. Focusing on the detailed description of the corpse in th case, "the victim of bodily opening and exposure," which extends right down to the exa

measurements of the deep razor slashes made on it, Stewart asks:

> What, if any, of the information [the descriptions of bodily disfiguration] is in fact evidence? And more disturbing: Why is it important to differentiate among drops, clots, and pools [of blood What is the depth of a razor slash evidence of? ... Prurient excess would seem to undermine th strict task of productive looking. More to the point, productive looking seems to lead all to irresistibly to prurient excess. (695)

How, then, are we to understand these – in Stewart's words – “nonproductive desires associated wi violence” (694) and the attraction, but also the abhorrence, of readers to them? Why is so muc textual time spent giving those excessively bloody details that are irrelevant to the scientific busine of detection? Do such excesses again signify (for the reader) some psychological compensation for “behavioural regime” (696) that restricts human behavior, in terms of day-to-day social practice, in its most productive channels?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and any explanation of the popularity of crime writin – and of crime fiction in particular – will be complicated, multi-faceted, and sometimes paradoxica and will take in various types of historical, sociological, and psychological circumstance. M intention in this book is to indicate some of the elements responsible for such a popularity, but in th knowledge that there is no simple or straightforward key to be found. Stewart's focus on New York i the 1850s and the conditions and pressures of its everyday life is, though, suggestive in indicating th importance to crime writing both of the rise of the city and of the living and working conditions those situated within a fast-modernizing Western capitalist system. This is not, however, to say tha all such writing must be urban-based (for that is patently wrong) nor that a modernized Wester economy is a necessary condition for its production. But it is to suggest that city life – its institution structures, its economic life, and its policing – are vital factors in the development and importance the genre.

Crime fiction writer Austin S. Camacho (2008) points out on the “Criminal Minds at Work” websit (run by a group of crime novelists) that the present enormous popularity of the crime fiction genre is relatively recent phenomenon: “Did you know,” he asks,

> that crime novels account for somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of the fiction sold around th world? At least what's published in English. It makes you wonder why books about murder an other evils that men do are so popular.... The popularity of crime fiction is a fairly rece phenomenon. 20 or 30 years ago, you didn't see crime novels on the bestseller list. Today the regularly account for half of it. But what accounts for this love of mystery fiction?

We are reminded here that the appeal of popular fictional genres changes in response to particula historical circumstances. This is true both of novels and films, with – in that latter case – Hollywoo centrally involved in such a process. Thus, the western, for example, was at the peak of its populari from the late 1940s to the early 1960s – a period in which the belief that it had been white America historical destiny to spread westward across the continent, with a continued mission (both home an abroad) to defend and protect liberty, family, and democracy against whatever outside threat migh appear, still (mostly) retained its currency. In turn, horror fiction, and particularly film, saw a perio of ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s, a period when the promise of American society wa undermined by a whole series of cultural and political tensions, and when the sanctity and importan of the family (taken for granted in the western), its patriarchal assumptions, and its role maintaining the status quo were subject to searing critique. Clearly the relationship between social an political realities on a transnational (as well as purely North American) scale and the changin

popularity of generic tastes in fiction and film is a complex business and, in considerable part, beyo
the ~~scope of this book. The present popularity of crime fiction cannot, however, be divorced from~~ suc
factors.

If I were to start to identify some of the reasons for such an upsurge, I would point to a whole rang of factors concerning our (as readers) contemporary sense of identity and social agency; o understanding of gender, both masculinity and femininity, and the roles we attribute to each; our fea and vulnerabilities as far as our physical bodies are concerned; our larger sense of the social networ that position us, and the relationship accordingly played out between individual autonomy and th power of the state; our attitudes to lawlessness and the law, and the relationships of both to the great social compact and our awareness of the tensions and injustices that exist there; and our anxieti about the power of officialdom and its supervisory authority. What I basically suggest here is th crime fiction confronts the problems of the everyday world in which we live as directly as any form writing can. It allows its readers – though sometimes indirectly and obliquely – to engage with the deepest social concerns, their most fundamental anxieties about themselves and their surroundi world. This engagement, though, can vary in intensity, and vary too in any explicit recognition by th reader of its presence.

At its most basic level, crime fiction works as a highly accessible fictional form and one th functions best in the grip it holds on its reader in terms of basic narrative structure. Who is th criminal and how will he or she get caught? Will the victim – where a living victim is involved escape the criminal's clutches? How will the detective or police team solve the mystery established the text? For many readers any further social or cultural resonance a text may have will remain belo their conscious radar and unexplored – and none the worse for that. As a critic, however, my intentio is to explore those further levels, (hopefully) to assist those who read this book to see something mo of the cultural value and importance of the genre.

Part 2

The Politics, Main Forms, and Key Concerns of Crime Fiction

The Politics of Crime Fiction

The door was invented by the bourgeoisie to protect the individual; now it becomes a threat; one advised never to turn the key....This is the totalitarian aspiration towards a transparent societ "My dear fellow," says Holmes to Watson, "if we could fly out that great window hand in hand hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are goin on..." ("Case of Identity"). Holmes exists because Peter Pan does not: it is not yet possible to f through keyholes.

Franco Moretti, "Clues" (1983: 13

There are many ways of approaching crime fiction. Here, I focus on an issue of central importanc to the way crime fiction works and the cultural issues it engages. While I refer to a number of criti working in the field (and to the work of Franco Moretti in particular), my intention is not to weig down my argument with too much theoretical matter, nor to give a comprehensive overview of th critical writing on this subject. I rather highlight ways of thinking about the politics of crime fictio that I have found useful, in the hope that this will start to open up the area in productive ways f others, too. I return in more detail to some of the topics raised in this chapter as the book continues.

Franco Moretti's chapter "Clues" in his book *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1983) provides a goo starting point for thinking about crime fiction and its social and political implications. For one of th most productive ways of thinking about the genre is its relationship to the dominant social system: the hierarchies, norms, and assumptions of the particular area, country, and historical period represents, and to the power and authority of the state that ultimately upholds that system. To say th is immediately to recognize here a certain slippage. For, on the one hand I am referring to th internalization of a general set of social norms and values that condition day-to-day lives in any give culture: its generally accepted rights and wrongs, its patterns of social organization, and th relationships between the individual, the family, and the larger community. On the other, any allusio to the power of the state is a reminder of the coercive powers – the police, the secret service, th justice system, and law – used by a dominant ruling class to discipline the larger social group and keep anti-social and/or anti-establishment tendencies in check. To recognize this move betwee accepted social norms and the machinery of the law, and the varying and often tricky nature of th relationship, is crucial to an understanding of all that now follows.

I see crime fiction as a genre that can be used for conservative ends, to protect and sustain th dominant social order, but that can also (often, paradoxically, at one and the same time) work in more radical and challenging way. I agree with Catherine Nickerson (1997) that crime fiction is

genre that can release "explosive cultural material" (756); that it is:

> deeply enmeshed with most of the thornier problems of the Victorian, modern, and postmoder eras, including gender roles and privileges, racial prejudice and the formation of raci consciousness, the significance and morality of wealth and capital, and the conflicting demands privacy and social control.

I would, accordingly, echo her words – that the genre "represent[s] in a generally realistic style th most anxiety-producing issues and narratives of a culture" (744–745).

There may be tendency at this point to say, so what? Isn't this, after all, what we expect from an novel to a lesser or greater extent? This may be true, but what makes the crime fiction genre s distinctive is its direct relationship to the law, and to the fracturing of the social system that supports and protects. The crucial business of detective fiction (specifically) consists of the solving crime and the restoration of normality and the rule of law: so, accordingly, Dennis Porter argues th "[i]n a detective story...the law itself is never put on trial" (1981: 122). As I later show, this statemen is not always true. But, where it *is* the case, how then does the form release its "explosive cultur materials," and can such a release be any more than temporary and provisional before the fin containment of the disruptive forces that have been released? There are no hard-and-fast answers these questions, but it is in the putting and exploring of them that the fascination and the power crime fiction can be most clearly seen.

Franco Moretti has been praised by John Sutherland (2006: n.p.) for

> tak[ing] English studies by the scruff of the neck, refusing to observe the distinctions between hig and low literature, between academic and common-reader approaches. He can talk (at machine-gu speed) about Sherlock Holmes and Joyce's Ulysses in the same breath.

I use Moretti's written, not his spoken, work here but one of the reasons I do so is because of that san (refreshing) breakdown of literary categories, one that is at the heart of my own critical enterprise to This does not mean, however, that Moretti is particularly easy to read and understand. An Italia Marxist by origin, he looks to position crime fiction in its socio-political and historical context. An in "Clues," he focuses primarily on Sherlock Holmes to show how we can read this master detective a defender of the status quo, "interested only in *perpetuating* the existing order" (140). "Detectiv fiction," Moretti writes, "is a hymn to culture's coercive abilities" (143). As this last senten indicates, his argument may focus on a particular type of crime fiction (he directly mentions Agath Christie as well as Holmes) but claims a wider application. And he provides (to my mind) a goo starting point from which we can move to consider the genre's more radical possibilities – i ideological tensions, its ability to challenge established conventions and norms and to ask questio about the larger condition of the society, its values and systems of authority.

Moretti calls Sherlock Holmes "the great *doctor* of the late Victorians, who convinces them th society is still a great *organism*: a unitary and knowable body." Holmes' "science," he continues, " none other than the ideology of this organism" (145). The authoritative knowledge of this doctori figure, then, comes about due to the "*unproblematic*" (144) nature of the relationship between [thi "science" and the larger social order – unproblematic (in Moretti's eyes) because of Holmes' tot ("ideological") commitment to that order and to the status quo. Holmes, then, is the controlling figu who, whatever his personal eccentricities, represents established values and can (relatively) easily an clearly solve any crime or "mystery" (145) he faces, because of its exceptional or aberrant quality its existence as a highly visible sign of discord and disturbance in an otherwise settled and holist social world.

The assumption underlying the detective stories featuring Holmes and Christie's Hercule Poirot and, ~~by extension, many other detective protagonists – is that the social body, representing~~ th existing, and desired, good, is always the “innocent” victim (144) of the individual criminal act. An innocence and guilt here are measured, crucially, in terms of the contrast between stereotypic normality (all who live under the umbrella of the dominant value system) and individualism (the sig of danger and of difference, of the failure to conform). Thus, “[i]nnocence is conformit individuality, guilt....Detective fiction...exists expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might b impersonal, and therefore collective and social” (135).

Society, in such a view, is never guilty. “Because the crime is presented in the form of a myster [and focusing on the interaction between the criminal and the victim], society is absolved from th start: the solution of the mystery proves its innocence” (145). The two quotes I have just used ma sound puzzling, but this is a product of Moretti's rather epigrammatic style. In fact, what he is sayin is quite simple: I explain, accordingly, as I go on. Social science has long seen the functioning o society as a complex business, with an “*infinity* of causal factors [conditioning] the occurrence of [an one] individual ‘event’” (sociologist Max Weber, qtd. in Moretti 1983: 144). Detective fiction, rathe “aims to keep the relationship between science and society *unproblematic*” (144), to reduc complexity to simplicity. The criminal and the crime he or she commits become, within th framework of genre, as Moretti portrays it, the *only relevant cause* of social upset. There is litt interest in what may cause criminality, nor in the energies released in a fast-modernizing social worl that might affect that world's (“organic”) unity and settled hierarchies – and that in reality make an type of full and proper social control problematic, even “impossible” (143). So, for instance:

> Money is always the motive of crime in detective fiction, yet the genre is wholly silent abo *production*: that unequal exchange between labour-power and wages which is the true source social wealth....The indignation about what is rotten and immoral in the economy must concentra on...phenomena [such as]...thefts, con-jobs, frauds, false pretences, and so on....As for the factory it is innocent, and thus free to carry on. (139)

The rightness, justice, and value of the everyday social world – the world of stereotype, conformit fitting-in, de-individualization – is taken for granted here. The possibility that there may exist exact in that world a site for enquiry into warping injustice, and even forms of violence, is occluded by th genre's focus on the wholly exceptional individual act. So, Moretti asks us to think about Agath Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (published in 1921 but written in 1916), claiming that in th detective novel anything “*repeatable* and *obvious*” cannot, of its very nature, “be criminal” or wor investigating. So, accordingly, “Agatha Christie's first book is set at the same time as the massacres o the Great War, yet the only murder of interest occurs on the second floor of Styles Court” (135). Flaw and failures in the Western (capitalist) socio-political order are ignored, in other words, in favor o single individual acts that threaten the status quo and, most especially, the lives, money, and propert of the privileged classes.

There is an obvious Marxist thrust to this analysis (the “innocent” factory), and also a Foucaultia one. (Fuller discussion of Foucault will wait until my chapter on “Vision, Supervision, and the City.” All I need to say in terms of the latter here is that Moretti associates Sherlock Holmes, even despi his unofficial status, with the notion of the policing and the *supervision* of society (my emphasis). major issue at stake is that of privacy – directly related to the already-mentioned subject individualism. Liberal ideology believes in the right and benefit of a certain individual “‘freedo from’...the interference of society” (136). This assumption is challenged and reversed (so Moret

argues) in detective fiction, where the locked door – a favored traditional motif in the genre – n ~~longer signifies that protective barrier behind which the citizen can exercise this freedom and~~ his her individual difference. Rather, the genre "treats every element of individual behavior that desire secrecy as an offence" (135–136). Such secrecy is seen as a threat to the controlling authority of th doctoring state and its representatives – an evasion of conformity and full social belonging (Moret argues that Holmes' own individualism is suppressed in the service of his detective work). Suc secrecy, too, is posited as the unwelcome opponent of society's need for transparency and the benefi of that supervisory authority that the detective represents. This is why, in the introductory quote t this chapter, Moretti alludes to Holmes as a Peter Pan figure, able to keep a controlling eye on th whole panorama of urban space and seemingly able even to peer into locked private rooms. This, to is why he describes detective fiction as that hymn to a culture's "coercive abilities," and the detectiv himself as "the figure of the state in the guise of 'night watchman,'" whose limited role lies "assuring respect for laws" (154–155).

I have spent some time on Moretti because he offers the type of sociological perspective on crim fiction rarely encountered elsewhere, and one that is powerful and provocative in its implication Moretti also discusses the *narrative structure* of the type of detective fictions on which he focuse seeing this structure as confirming the conservative nature of the form. I use Agatha Christie's *Th Mysterious Affair at Styles* to provide my own textual example as prelude and bolster to Morett more abstract arguments. The murder of Mrs. Inglethorp, the crime that drives Christie's novel, occu early on – in chapter three – of the novel. The rest of the book is dedicated to the investigation an solution of this mystery. In essence, then, the whole unfolding textual process focuses around, an takes us back to, this early narrative point as Poirot works out who committed this crime and why, an explores the time before, and leading up to, the murder to uncover the sequence of events that cause it. Ultimately, his detective work restores the social order as it existed *before* that crime occurre with everything once more in its former proper place – though, of course, with victim and crimin now removed. In fact, not only does Poirot do this, he also manages to repair certain fissur previously affecting this "orderly and hierarchical world," returning "the Inglethorp fortune to i rightful owners, [and]...restor[ing] conjugal happiness to the marriage of John and Mary Cavendish (Malgrem 2010: 154–155).

There is, to put this another way, little interest in character development here. What we have instea – and this takes us back to my earlier point – is a world of stereotypes: a cast of "innocent" characte marked out as such by their social and cultural conformity. These stereotypes, for Moretti, only "com alive" (137), take on visibility and importance, when the crime that ruptures the smooth pattern of th social world is committed. The whole thrust of the detective novel, then, is "*to restore an earlier sta of things*" (Freud, qtd. in Moretti: 137), to "[r]einstate a previous situation, return to the beginning" in Christie's case to a relatively unchanging, privileged, and upper-class English country-hou existence. The movement of the narrative of detection is regressive, "from crime to prelude" (Moret 1983: 137). There is no growth to this story: "In detective fiction, as in law, history assume importance only as *violation* and as such, must be ultimately repressed....[T]he ideal is for nothing happen" (138–139).

Moretti's description of the way in which Doyle's and Christie's detective fiction supports an endorses the status quo, and how the backward-looking structure of the genre endorses this politic and social vision, is generally convincing. It makes one of the strongest cases for the reactiona nature of the form, and stands as one pole in any exploration of the way the genre works. But Moret ignores hard-boiled crime fiction in his essay. And, in the conventional critical view, it is here that th

other pole to his way of seeing detective fiction is to be found – where anxieties about the existin social order are much more apparent, and where such anxieties are reflected, too, in its differe narrative structure. I show how this argument works before then suggesting that, if the oppositio constructed here between two types of crime writing – one at the conservative end of the spectrum, th other challenging the social status quo – contains a general truth, we should be wary of simplificatio of falling into an overly reductive way of thinking. To categorize in this way does not do full justice what is a much more complicated and diverse generic panorama.

I return at this point to Nickerson's comment on the genre's ability to express "explosive cultur material." Holmes may be seen as protecting the health of the Victorian social organism, reinforcin its conventional patterns and practices through his detective work. But, by the 1920s, and in the Unite States, his role as a "consulting detective" (Doyle 1981a: 23), working out of intellectual intere rather than material need, had been replaced by that of the professional private eye or detectiv working to make a living: in the case of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, "twenty-five dollars day and expenses" (Chandler 1979: 94). And the detective's relation to the dominant social order ha taken a different turn: serving as an individual example of (by and large) honesty and integrity in modernized urban world generally associated with greed, chicanery, and political corruption. Th notion of the social system as a healthy organism was by now, and in this modern America environment, nothing but a bad joke. The crime novel became, instead, a tool to dissect society's flaw and failures, and to expose the wrong turns that a capitalist economy, and the political structures which it was allied, had taken. The strained relationship between the protagonist and his surroundin social world took on a highly critical – and sometimes radical – edge here, as "the significance an morality of wealth and capital" was held up for serious, and usually damning, review.

I illustrate my meaning here through a reading of Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), a nov that set the benchmark for such hard-boiled crime fiction. I am aware of the mismatch in setting m earlier summary of a particular critical approach against a text-based analysis. But I see this as th best way to make an argument that persists, in a variety of ways, throughout this book. The tone *Red Harvest* is set by the laconic and cynical wit of its narrator, whose only identity, the Continent Op, is determined, significantly, by his professional role as an employee of the Continental Detectiv Agency. Entering the city of Personville (or Poisonville, as it has come to be known), the Op describ what he sees:

> an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that ha been all dirtied up by mining. Spread over this was a grimy sky that looked as if it had come out the smelters' stacks.
>
> The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabb uniform. The third stood...directing traffic, with a cigar in one corner of his mouth. After that stopped checking them up. (9)

Physical description quickly takes on a metaphorical cast here, as the urban landscape and its indust are associated with pollution, a spreading stain affecting every feature of the natural environment th frames it. And the swift move from the city to its law enforcers and their casual and slapdash turno and behavior immediately prepares us for a civic world in which things are very much awry. The fa that the narrator is a stranger to the town where he is now to be employed, and describes it from th perspective, implies the absence of any strong commitment to its norms and values on his part, an suggests, instead, a certain self-protective wariness of the world he is about to enter.

The first thing that happens to the Op in Personville is that Donald Willsson, the liberal an

reformist local newspaper publisher who has paid for his services (but whom he has not yet met) murdered. The Op quickly finds out that Personville is a city riddled with corruption, violence, an criminality. This situation had its original cause in a labor dispute between the local miners, supporte by the IWW (International Workers of the World) and Elihu Willsson, Donald's father, “the man wh had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts...president of...the Personville Mining Corporatio ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the... city's only newspapers” (13). Political, industrial, an financial power and a press monopoly are, then, figured in this one man. In order to break the resultin strike, Elihu had “hired gunman, strike-breakers, national guardsmen and even parts of the regul army.” But, in defeating the miners and the “wobblies” (the slang name for the radical IWW supporting them, Elihu “lost his hold on the city and the state. To beat the miners he had to let h hired thugs run wild. When the fight was over he couldn't get rid of them....[T]hey took [Personvill over” (14). Donald had been unwittingly set up by his father to start a reform campaign in the tow and thus potentially to drive out its power-sharing criminal element. With his death, the Op takes u Elihu's challenge to “clean this pig-sty of a Poisonville for me, to smoke out the rats,” but on his ow less melodramatic terms: “If you've got a fairly honest piece of work to be done in my line, and yo want to pay a decent price, maybe I'll take it on....But I'm not playing politics for you....[Y]ou're goin to get a complete job or nothing” (38, 40).

There are already a number of things to be said here. Hammett gives us an exaggerated parable the U. S. industrial and political complex (as he saw it) in the representation of Personville. Everyda normality and social life is conspicuous by its absence as he focuses almost solely on issues politics, power, and criminality. The hostility of capitalism to labor is endorsed by the larger sta apparatus – Elihu's use of the national guard and army to break the strike. The final impotence of lab against such institutional odds, and in the violence of the conflict that occurs, is accordingly pret much inevitable, whatever the justice of its case and strength of its campaign: “When the last sku had been cracked...organized labor in Personville was a used firecracker” (14). Elihu's reliance (part) on state power, as well as the knowledge that he “owned a United States senator, a couple o representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature” (13), make it clear that th civic issues Hammett engages extend well beyond Personville's city limits.

The view of “the kind of capitalist state personified by Elihu Willsson's Personville/Poisonvill (Pepper 2010a: 145), then, is a bleak one. Willsson is the untrustworthy father figure (for the persona when it does briefly appear, endorses the political), one who wishes once more to have comple authority as “Czar” (15) over his city, as well as over the son he uses “for his monkey” (14). Labor an the rights of common working men have been rendered irrelevant in this America, where they a judged merely a hindrance to the larger operations of the economic and institutional system. As th Op enters the scene and begins “stirring things up” (70), we are shown a city in which the police a open to bribery (“Buy us a get-away, Jerry....A uniformed copper held the back gate open,” 48) an where the police chief, Noonan, is hand in glove with gangsters involved in a variety of illic activities – Pete the Finn (illegal liquor), Max Thaler (gambling), and Lew Yard (stolen goods). An these are the three men who, alongside Willsson and Noonan, both run the town and “own the court (95). As Noonan tells the Op, explaining the nature of the resulting alliances, “I got to play with the that play with me. See what I mean?” (81).

In this poisonous atmosphere, the Op himself – as he looks to open the town up “from Adam's app to ankles” (55) as a way of cleaning it up – is himself metaphorically “poisoned” (123). Playing game of deceit and double-cross, he gets caught up in the mayhem around him, becomes party to th killings involved, and even finds himself “getting a rear out of planning deaths” (123), going “blo

simple like the natives" (121). He is also implicated in the death of Dinah Brand, the one person f whom he has a genuine emotional attachment. Indeed, initially, he fears that it is he himself who ha buried the "six-inch needle-sharp blade" of the ice-pick she owns (128) in her breast. Hammett representing a world here in which decent intent, and the actions that follow from it, are swiftly ar inevitably compromised. He also shows that – in a situation where the normal checks and balanc (the press, labor organizations) have failed, and where law is bought and sold (attorney-at-lav Charles Proctor Dawn, is "the guy that the joke was wrote about: 'Is he a criminal lawyer?' 'Ye very,'" 144) – it is only the Op's pragmatic individualism, however morally suspect it then become that can have any effect in addressing the general corruption. The irony is, of course – and here v come to the rub of so much crime fiction – that all the Op can finally do is to restore the previous, ar highly unsatisfactory, status quo as the national guard are once more called in, and the Op final gives Personville back into Elihu Willsson's hands, "all nice and clean and ready to go to the do again" (157). But Willsson himself is implicated in the general criminality – the material his son ha obtained just before his death "would have put his old man in jail with the rest of them" (35). He ha too, it seems, both initially obtained and held on to his autocratic power in this town by similar illeg and/or immoral methods. When the Op calls him an "old pirate," he replies, "Son, if I hadn't been pirate I'd still be working for the Anaconda [the Anaconda Copper Mining Company] for wages, ar there'd be no Personville Mining Corporation" (119).

What we then see in Hammett's brilliant novel is a clear illustration of the deep anxieties abo capitalism and political and economic power, and their relation to corruption and violent criminalit in late 1920s America. And, if the Continental Op finds his own sense of moral integrity highl compromised in his attempt to bring some kind of order to the "damned burg" (121) in which l works, that does not affect his distaste for both its original, and its final, governance. Nor does affect his final re-establishment of his day-to-day professional role at a clear remove from th extreme actions and personal compromises to which it has led him in this particular case. Andre Pepper, one of the most perceptive critics of Hammett's work, sees the writer's "dark vision" here anticipating such writers as Chester Himes and James Ellroy, and suggests two possible readings the book's final message:

> [I]nsofar as [Hammett's] own politics would take a more radical turn in the decade following th publication of *Red Harvest*, it might be possible to read the anger that lies behind the Op's rhetor [at the end of the novel] not simply as an expression of nihilistic despair but also as a spur to actio on the part of his readers. That said, given the expanded nature and reach of state power in th novel, one could just as well see and read [it] as a harbinger of the kind of even more repressiv constellations of political and economic power characteristic of the post-Second World War era.
>
> (Pepper 2010b: 34

We see here, then, a gap between the role of the individual detective and his values and the soci political status quo that is very different to the complementary relationship Moretti establishes Doyle's and Christie's case. Moreover, here, and in hard-boiled detective fiction generally, we see very different formal structure employed. The classical detective story, as previously discussed, backward-looking, with the detective engaged in solving a crime (usually) committed either before soon after the chronological start of the text – and with much of its focus on his or her analytic skil in recovering and recreating the backstory of that crime and the motives of the criminal(s) involve Knight refers to it aptly as "the death-detection-explanation model" (2004: 136). The hard-boile crime novel is progressive rather than regressive, tracing an ongoing chain of violent criminal actio

the way it proliferates, and its relationship to a contaminated larger social body, rather tha
~~foregrounding the exceptional and relatively discrete nature of the (often) single criminal act a~~s in th
classical case. To some degree at least, then, and certainly in Hammett's case, the way the hard-boile
works reflects its different political positioning. There is much more emphasis, too, on the detectiv
protagonist's involvement in the ongoing and violent action at the text's center, rather than on h
ability to stand separately, at one analytic remove from that world. I will return to this in my ne
chapter.

Hammett's novel, though, can tell us more about how the formal differences between the two typ
of detective fiction work. In *Red Harvest*, the initial case, the murder of Donald Willsson, is in fa
relatively swiftly solved – as a crime of passion. Albury, an assistant cashier at the First Nation
Bank, has misunderstood the nature of the check Willsson has taken to Dinah Brand (whom Albur
himself is “cuckoo over,” 51) as a sign of romantic involvement between the two, in accordance wi
Dinah's reputation as a “strictly pay-as-you-enter” (28) woman. In fact, the money is a pay-off f
information given on the criminal corruption in the town. But, by the time this one case is solved a
the murderer revealed, we have started to move on to that latter and larger intrigue, with the O
already hired by Elihu for his clean-up job. And it is as he acts to fulfill this contract that he ge
caught up in the city's violence and deceit, foments and manipulates more of it for his own final en
(to cleanse the town), and causes the body count to escalate accordingly. The Op is right in the midd
of the action here, making sense of what happens as best he can – and at times losing the ability to
so – on a pragmatic moment-by-moment basis. The brevity of Hammett's action-packed chapte
entirely suit this process (and would provide a highly influential model for future crime fictions).

As I have said, the one person with whom the Op has a personal relationship of any intimacy, Dina
Brand, is caught up in the chain of violence he instigates and is herself murdered. Chapter twenty-on
in which her death occurs, is titled “The Seventeenth Murder,” reducing her to just another statistic
the town is “bust[ed]...open” (118). And more deaths are to follow. This sense of rapidly developin
and often confusing, ongoing action, and the denial of the reflective calm and lack of person
involvement so common in its classical form, make up a large part of hard-boiled crime fictio
distinctive difference.

We can then arrive at some general conclusions. Hard-boiled crime fiction is more likely to relea
“explosive cultural materials” – those that raise direct and challenging questions about the values
the dominant social order and our status both as individuals and community members within it – th
its classical equivalent. The very forms of the two types of fiction, what is more, facilitate the
different effects. This general political difference between the classical and hard-boiled variants
detective fiction stands as a foundation point for much of the discussion that follows, and mirrors t
basic chronological development of the genre. In the remainder of this chapter, though, I add a seri
of necessary qualifications to the rather black-and-white reading of the genre, and the concentratio
on – and separation of – its two main variants I have thus far given, even as I remain committed to t
general truth above.

The first thing to say here is that simply to oppose the politics of classical and hard-boiled detecti
fiction in the way I have so far done is far too simple. We have learned in a post-structuralist age
distrust stark oppositions – binary readings of the world – and crime fiction is no exception to th
rule. Hard-and-fast rules about the politics of crime fiction are extremely difficult to make. Tex
following a hard-boiled model may, as I have argued, have more obvious potential for radical soci
commentary than those in the classical tradition. But, as Lee Horsley comments, and writing about a
forms of the crime novel:

> The genre itself is neither inherently conservative nor radical: rather, it is a form that can be co-opted for a variety of purposes. There has always been within it a capacity for socio-politic comment, and using it in this way is facilitated by the very nature of crime fiction....[T]he gen itself contains characteristics that lend themselves to political and oppositional purposes. (200 158–159)

I agree with this, even as I distinguish between the different political potential of the classical ar hard-boiled forms.

It is at this point that I recall Pepper's comments on the ending of *Red Harvest* and the two possib responses to it: that it might act as a spur to individual political action to oppose political ar economic corruption; or that it might simply serve to confirm the way things are – the repressiv nature of state power in the modern age, and our general inability to do much about it. In other word while there is much about the novel we can read as “oppositional,” there is nonetheless a counte movement that is more accommodating to the status quo. This contradiction is a repeate characteristic of crime fiction novels of all types. So even here – in a novel written by a writer wi known left-wing sympathies and that depicts a particularly morally and politically dysfunction urban reality – the detective ends up restoring the prior social order more or less as it existed befo the crimes that he investigates were committed, with only a very qualified possibility for soci change (dependant, if we follow Pepper, on the political response of the individual reader). Classic and hard-boiled crime fiction, then, share a final underlying formal similarity. While differences ma exist in terms of the *explicit recognition* on the part of any one or other writer of the problemat nature of the social reality he or she depicts, and in her or his *commitment to* (*or disaffiliation fron the existing socio-political order*, this generally has little influence on the final narrative results, the status quo, however unsatisfactory, is restored. Criminal and anti-social activity occurs onl (normally) for the immediate problem(s) to be resolved, with little or nothing having been done alter the dominant social reality and whatever the faults there evident. This pattern is present almost all variants of the crime fiction genre and tends consequently to mute some of the politic differences between them.

Indeed, simply to contrast a hard-boiled crime writing (generally American) that challenges th existing social order with a classical detective tradition (generally British) whose conservative politi finds a mirror in the formal strategies it uses is, again, too reductive. Hard-boiled American fictio can certainly work to conservative ends, as any number of examples illustrate (Ed McBain and Josep Wambaugh jump to mind). Similarly, it is difficult to imagine any type of detective novel – classica or hard-boiled, American or British – that does not explore the cultural anxieties of its time and plac and in a way that challenges (though to varying degrees) the existing social order. So, Doyle Sherlock Holmes is not just the figure Moretti makes him, totally committed to the ideologies ar social structures of his Victorian period, but also himself contains “almost uncontainab contradictions” and self-divisions (Horsley 2005: 31) that reflect back accordingly, and in a critic way, on the society in which he lives. And, in twinning him with his arch-enemy Moriarty and giving both men similar characteristics, Doyle anticipates other such doublings across the crim fiction spectrum (as that of Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris' 1981 novel, *Re Dragon*) that undermine the clarity of the boundaries between a social virus and its doctoring vaccine

That nostalgically conservative glow, too, that is so often associated with Agatha Christie's fiction not without its complications: that glow is unsettled, at least in part, in its gentle challenge (in th Miss Marple stories) to fixed and conventional gender roles; unsettled, too, in “the...frisson

anxiety” that comes from

> the deadly potential embedded in even the most mundane domestic situation. Parents, childre spouses all prove to be lethal family members, while apparent bastions of society – doctor politicians, wealthy manufacturers...– could also be dangerous. Christie's texts assume that anyo can be a murderer, no one is exempt, no one totally to be trusted.
>
> (Makinen 2010: 41

The whole fabric of inter-war English social life is, in fact, more precariously balanced than a first a superficial reading of Christie's work might suggest (see, especially, Light 1991; Peach 2006). Gi Plain identifies clear structural and thematic similarities shared by Christie's and Chandler's work th tend to blur any too-firm boundaries between their supposed “conservative feminine and groun breaking masculine” difference (see Horsley 2005: 68). Not all classical detective novels, either, a as formally alike as Moretti suggests. For a good number of such texts “disrupt such apparent predictable elements as the reliable narrator and the reliably ‘fixed’ triangle of characters – detectiv victim, criminal” (Horsley 2005: 41). A good number, too, do address the “thornier problems” of the historical period even when their central narrative thrust is, to recall Moretti, “*to restore an earli state of things*.” I explore such issues further in the cases of both Doyle and Christie later in this boo

The boundaries containing the two forms (classical and hard-boiled) are then – to a certain degree permeable. A number of critics indeed have questioned the accuracy of classifying types of crim fiction in this way in the first place. They suggest that to do so is over-dependent on, and unde critical of, Raymond Chandler, who used his highly influential essay “The Simple Art of Murde (1944) (see my next chapter) as “a way of positioning the American model as being more truth-tellin and indeed more masculine” than its British counterpart (Knight 2004: 111). They point, too, to th distortions that result in focusing on key figures such as Doyle and Christie, Hammett and Chandle who represent only a fraction of the full range and variety of the crime novel and who bring a occluded timescale to its critical history.

While I recognize all these things, and despite such reservations, I stick to my earlier argument: th hard-boiled fiction was (primarily) an American form of writing, dating from the late 1920s a 1930s, that offered much more of an explicit challenge to the social and political status quo than i (mainly British) classical detective counterpart. As Horsley says: “Whereas the golden age write [Christie et al.] can be said to have created detective fiction that *encodes* the socio-political anxieti of their time, hard-boiled writers addressed the problems of their society explicitly” (Horsley 200 68). But – and this is crucial – as time has passed, the contours of crime fiction have changed. As the have done so, generic lines of division have blurred, at the same time as different variants of the gen have developed and flourished. Accordingly, the very terms “classical” and “hard-boiled” have com to be, to a certain degree, outmoded. We are, however, still able to identify – to varying degrees crime novels in such terms, and judge their politics accordingly. Even if Conan Doyle and Agath Christie's novels illustrate anxieties about the traditional social order, they remain committed to i And the gap in social vision between their fiction and that of Dashiell Hammett remains enormou So, in a more recent period, we see a similar gap between (say) P. D. James and James Ellroy. Th hard-boiled texts of Hammett and Ellroy (and those who write in their mould) provide the deeper a much more damning critique of the social world they represent and have by far the greater politic “bite.”

But I want to return here to another earlier point: that to talk of crime fiction in terms of tw variants, the classical and hard-boiled detective novels (however important these two forms are),

reductive. The astute reader will already have noticed the fuzziness of my terminology thus far: I hav introduced the very term “detective fiction” in a rather one-dimensional way, and have used interchangeably with the wider generic label “crime fiction.” I address this issue further in my ne chapter. But, for now, I need to widen and clarify my definitional boundaries, for crime fiction is mo various than I have thus far suggested, and to qualify my previous analysis accordingly.

First, and this connects with what I have just said about the historical development of the genre, th type and number of detective fictions that have been written have (unsurprisingly) changed over tim The detective writing I have so far mainly been discussing features the private – amateur professional – detective, who may or may not ally himself with the police, but who is not a policema is not employed by the state. But we also need to take into account the category of the police novel – form of crime fiction that became increasingly popular from the 1950s onward. It would be easy assume that here – where crime is solved by what we might clumsily call the apparatus of the state that the more conservative implications of crime writing would become increasingly and necessari apparent. For, in such fiction, the system of law and its representatives are, in theory, one and th same, with established institutions and social norms protected and upheld by the policemen an women featured in such texts.

In England, Colin Dexter's *Inspector Morse* series (1975–1999) provides a good example of such model, modified only (as is not unusual in such texts) by Morse's personal eccentricities an curmudgeonly anti-authoritarian attitudes. It may also be significant that Dexter's conservative use the police novel form connects strongly with the classical detective tradition of Conan Doyle an Christie. His emphasis on a picture-postcard hierarchical and traditional Oxford world where Mor tackles the case on which he works (in *The Jewel that Was Ours*) “like some fiendishly devise crossword” (Dexter 2007: 141) confirms the nature of such a connection, and its difference from th rawness and ever-present violence of the hard-boiled form.

The police novel is necessarily structured around the protection and re-establishing of the existin social order. It can, however, still be used to challenge that status quo – and increasingly has been. Th best explanation for this apparent paradox lies in the powerful effect that the hard-boiled tradition h had on so many authors working in this field – its gritty realism where violence and corruption a part and parcel of society as a whole and in which the police themselves are affected, and ofte infected, by such forces. The ten novels (1965–1975) by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, written t expose the social and political fissures and failings of the Sweden of their time, were to prove high influential here. (For, as I have already suggested, we cannot just identify the classical form wi British and European fiction and the hard-boiled with American. Both traditions have had their wid transnational influence.) The connection Andrew Pepper makes (mentioned earlier) between Hamme and police novel writer James Ellroy is also highly suggestive. For, Ellroy, in his *LA Quartet*, expos a deeply depraved system of male-driven economic, social, and political authority and power eve while he confirms its continuing corrupt vitality.

But there is another main form of crime writing that is still unmentioned – one that is not police private detective (private eye) fiction, and in which we shift away from a narrative structured roun the process of detection to one driven by the *actions and motivations of the criminal*, and what th follows from them. Scaggs calls such novels crime or noir thrillers (2005: 105–121); Horsle “literary noir” (2010: 39); Knight, “the crime novel” (2004: 125). Unsurprisingly, given the focus p on the figure of the transgressor here, such fictions tend to foreground flaws and insufficiencies in th social fabric and possible reasons for individual alienation rather than the beneficial value of th dominant social order and its operating structures. But a curious, though understandable, double log

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